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## Dog's Freedom

Milena Oda

Panel: Freedom's Limits? Core Values in a Changing World

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## Milena ODA

### Dog's Freedom

There is a phrase from Franz Kafka I always remember when I speak about freedom: “a cage in search of a bird.” I would like to adjust it for my essay to say, a chain in search of a dog.

I haven't chosen to be a foreigner in my life, but I have become one. I left the Czech cage and moved slowly into the German cage. I left my home when I finished my MFA. I was 23. I went to Germany on my own, filled with love. No, I didn't go to Germany for economic or political reasons, nor as a dissident the reason was idealistic, literary and poetic: my love of the written German language. I chose German, a foreign language, for my expression in my writing. I replaced my soul with a foreign stand-in and moved in a foreign country. And I continue to ask: am I still myself when I write in a foreign language and live in a foreign country? Please call me Foreigner.

The writer must write with her soul. I wrote in the German language, my soul became German. I persuaded my soul to become German. For many years German was, for me, the language of freedom of expression. When I tried writing prose in Czech, I felt the limitations [constraints] in my writing. My mother tongue alienates me, restricts me. My soul is too close to the bars of the cage. I wanted to create without borders. The Czech language puts me in a cage; German sets me free. Why should I live in the border space between languages? We have enough borders in Europe! I was happy and felt lucky, heightened, jazzed up about the success I had from the beginning with my stories written in German.

I was feeling good about the freedom of writing in German, and in Germany, until the decisive moment: until my book was finished and I had to find a publisher. What a painful realization: it was not I as a writer who was interesting to them (the publishers), but I as a symbol of my country. I was expected to present my nation within my literature. My writing was suddenly blocked by the social and national limitations, by searching a publisher and presenting myself to the German literary enterprise. I was not in synch with the literary business options available to me, at least not in the years 2007-2010. A label was put on me that projected me as not myself: I was not accepted as the writer I feel I am, instead as “an Eastern European writer.” I come from the Czech Republic, so I had to be labeled: a foreigner. I understood that business. I awoke from the dream, from a writer's illusion. My romantic dream about my destiny as a writer burst – an immense shock. I had always considered the romantic option, of the beauty of being writer. I never thought that I would have to deal with political statements. Yes, I agree, I indulged the beautiful dream about the archaic and archetypal writer. I began to

understand uncomfortable truth of the country I was in. The spirit of the German literary establishments is still heavily invested in political statements or social commentary. The purpose of literature is mostly political. With my literature I was therefore regarded as: useless. Not needed.

My great writing freedom had borders again. I was put in a cage. Again, in another zoo. They didn't see my love in my prose. They didn't see my devotion and passion for all I feel towards the German language, literature and culture. I became invisible. I became the dog-like creature biting its bare rump in its cage. They put me behind the German Wall, put me in the row of foreigners from Eastern Europe. Oblique questions and answers plagued me: is my writing not needed, because it's not about the borders in Europe? Shall I do violence to my soul and mind, and start writing what the literary business demands from me? No. I write about the borders within us, about the foreigner in us. My mind is not committed to politics. Politics in literature is for me nothing more than nonsense.

For ten years I held on, wore that label like a good soldier Švejk, like the servant Bohumil, fought against the mills like Don Quijote. I look back and see a terrifying slideshow, of my diminishing portraits, of the endless fights. I didn't ignore it; I absorbed it as my personal illness. When they told me that, first and foremost, I was Eastern European, I started becoming ill; when they put me and my writing in that cage and told me "You are not needed if you don't write as we wish," I got crazy. What madness, being useless! This was the absolute precipice; after this there was nothing else, only death or fortunate survival through a great miracle... The Jewish star on the coat is back; the omen on your forehead doesn't make things better. I took my Eastern European illness to a hospital and began a cure.

I felt compelled to make a move, to create some new freedom. What the hell! I am not a poor fool! What a shell-game of policy!! This is art? Literature? When you are ordered what you have to write about? And if you don't write what they need - what the business makes, you don't exist? But I exist and I want to write! I was born to be a writer! I don't want to be a prisoner, seeing my spirit sink into madness!

### **Hidden Freedom**

The other level of the freedom is hidden inside you.

Almost everybody here knows my motto: "I am a writer, not a fucking bestseller." I created it not for the provocation, but because I felt it to be a truth. Sure I know that the freedom in this motto is limited. The basic sense is this: the writer is an individual; the bestseller is a part of the system, and happy.

There is a chain of fast food in the US called Jack-in-the-Box. I visited one recently; during my quick visit to Spokane, I found only fast-food restaurants on the highway. The feeling of sitting there and actually being a jack-in-the box, chained to simple, unhealthy food, made me vomit.

Being a writer and not fitting in with the current topics, the current spirit or melody in the framework of a society is like being a jack-in-the box – popping up and down, suffering and howling to be noticed while still alive. Must the writer suffer? Not rich, not accepted. Hm. I don't want to suffer; I want to live a good life as a needed, respected writer... Limitations shouldn't damage creativity; illusions can also create wonders. I see this not as a grotesque game but as a serious one. To have no means for communication as an unnecessary writer, with nothing but humanity – no readers for my writing, no audience for my performances – is what I dread most, like all creative souls. We know many examples of such writers from the world's literature.

When they put me in that prison, in that box, I realized that Germany is not the country I came to, wanting to create, that this is not the country of my love and imagination if they constantly put me in the prison – in the box. But wait! This country mirrors, to a degree, what is going on in the world for everyone. Is the whole world like that? Yes and no. But one thing is clear: I say loudly – Milena, a new regime is being formed. A switch from communism to the new art of oppression and of limitations for art, the so-called *Media-Regime*. Media dominate us and set the rules of the freedom. This limited freedom of creativity and expression is the first sign of a world gone wrong! No more kindred spirits! Human beings are walking towards stupidity.

What a blessing to be a writer, sensible to hidden truths. I know there is something about policy and about the world's hidden social structures that makes individuals anxious. I see young and old people demonstrating. Now! In NYC, in Chicago, even in Iowa City – all over the world. I prompt my soul to go on strike, too. I want to create a revolution in literature. I will start that revolution! It is fate that forces me to forsake my power and my courage. I am not giving up fighting. I fight for my freedom and for the freedom of being a writer! I am a writer, not a fucking best seller! I don't want literature to become fast food literature, the literature of business and empty profit.

Now, literature, *everything*, is a chain store product. But a hotdog does not bark on a chain! He is happy to be fed. The world holds the chains for the rich and the powerful. Welcome to the Dog Club. Some dogs like being chained; some love freedom. I love freedom! I was put in the cage of my love. What a challenge. And that is my existence. Love is infinite. I continue to discover new possibilities in my love of freedom...

I am still a new breed; I am foreign, just woken up from the dream into this tricky world. As a German writer with my half-German soul I hope I will become a German shepherd and will make the right move with my serious, gallant manners, a spectacular - but not profitable - appearance in the new revolution for a literature of individuality. I am convinced that I can act, not just carry a story through action like a chained dog, but also to register emotions and portray a real character with my individual loves, loyalties, and hates. Literature must become individual again, to the same degree that it had been for ages in Europe.

Hold on, writer, if you don't fit in this current world. The world is still changing. I have a vision. I am keeping on track, not on the chain, not in the cage. I'll start the revolution as a fucking writer!